

# EFL Teachers' Insights Into Students' Willingness to Communicate in Hungarian Higher Education

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In today's globalised world, English proficiency and the willingness to communicate (WTC) have become essential for effective participation in educational, professional, and intercultural contexts (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The ultimate goal of language learning is not only to acquire linguistic knowledge but to seek and engage in meaningful communication (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Willingness to communicate, defined as the “readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), represents learners' intention and readiness to communicate in a second language (L2). It is both a personal choice and a situational opportunity, shaped by the complex interplay of internal and external factors. WTC reflects learners' motivation, confidence, and readiness to communicate, making it a key indicator of second language learning success (Havwini, 2019; Yashima et al., 2018).

Although communicative competence remains a fundamental goal in language education, achieving it does not necessarily guarantee active participation in communication (Khajavy et al., 2016). Research has shown that learners' WTC is influenced by a range of psychological and contextual factors, including motivation, self-confidence, classroom atmosphere, and affective factors such as anxiety and enjoyment (Dewaele, 2019; Kaw, 2025; Khajavy et al., 2016; Lee & Drajati, 2019). Recent studies have also emphasised the role of

pedagogical factors such as teacher–student interaction, instructional style, and the use of digital learning environments (Bui et al., 2022; Kaw, 2025; Kruk, 2022; Reinders & Wattana, 2015).

Research on WTC has expanded across both Western and non-Western contexts, including Canada and Hungary (Clément et al., 2003; Kasza-Tóth, 2021; Kaw, 2025; MacIntyre et al., 2001, 2003; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Qu, 2023), as well as Japan (Hashimoto, 2002; Yashima, 2002), China (Chen et al., 2021; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yu, 2015), Iran (Fallah, 2014; Ghonsooly et al., 2012; Khajavy et al., 2016; Riasati, 2018; Sheybani, 2019), Saudi Arabia and Morocco (Bensalem et al., 2023, 2025), Vietnam (Bui et al., 2022), and Turkey (Öz et al., 2015).

The teacher’s role is critical in shaping learners’ communicative behaviour and classroom engagement. Teachers influence learners’ engagement and psychological experiences through their enthusiasm and involvement in classroom interaction. Such teacher engagement may foster learner engagement through processes such as psychological contagion, highlighting the close connection between teacher and learner psychology (Smid & Mercer, 2025). This aligns with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1997) view that teacher–student interaction serves as a key medium for internalising educational values. In addition, students’ perceptions of their teachers’ attitudes, behaviours, and interpersonal presence can strongly affect their willingness to communicate (Kaw, 2025). Even subtle aspects of teacher presence, such as appearance or manner, may influence learners’ emotional responses and communicative confidence. For example, Effiong (2016) found that Japanese students reported higher anxiety when teachers dressed formally, demonstrating how teacher-related factors can shape classroom participation.

These findings indicate that teachers are important not only because they participate in classroom communication but also because their practices and interactions contribute to the conditions in which communication occurs. Teachers' perspectives can therefore provide a complementary understanding of students' WTC alongside learners' own perceptions and experiences. Their perspectives can therefore complement learners' own accounts by providing insight into how classroom interaction, teacher-related factors, and pedagogical practices may facilitate or constrain students' communicative engagement.

The educational context in which WTC develops has also undergone substantial change in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic brought substantial changes to higher education, with many learning activities shifting from face-to-face to online formats and with consequent changes to classroom interaction and students' learning experiences (Huang & Wang, 2023; Sato et al., 2023). For EFL learners, this transition changed the conditions under which opportunities for communication occurred. Research has also examined the influence of digital learning environments on WTC (Kruk, 2022; Reinders & Wattana, 2015). The COVID-19 period is therefore relevant to the study of WTC because the move to online education altered the settings in which teachers and students communicated.

The post-COVID period provides a further important context because university students and teachers have experienced changes in modes of instruction and classroom interaction. The participants in the present study experienced English language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, when instruction was delivered online, and after the pandemic, when face-to-face teaching resumed. Their experiences across these learning environments provide a relevant context for examining how teachers perceive students' communicative behaviour under changing educational conditions (Huang & Wang, 2023; Sato et al., 2023). Attention to teachers' experiences is particularly relevant because teachers

encountered these changes directly through their classroom practices and interactions with students.

Within Hungarian higher education, understanding students' WTC requires attention to the educational contexts in which communication takes place. Previous research has examined WTC in Hungary (e.g., Kasza-Tóth, 2021; Kaw, 2025; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007), but less attention has been given to teachers' perspectives on the factors that influence students' WTC. Teachers are particularly relevant because their pedagogical practices and interactions with students can shape classroom communication and students' engagement (Khajavy et al., 2018; Smid & Mercer, 2025).

This issue is particularly relevant in the context of the transition from online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to face-to-face instruction. The participants in the present study experienced both modes of instruction, providing an opportunity to examine teachers' perceptions of students' communicative behaviour across changing educational conditions. Accordingly, this study explores EFL university teachers' perceptions of the factors that influence students' WTC in face-to-face, online, and out-of-class contexts in Hungarian higher education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Factors Influencing WTC Inside the Classroom**

WTC is a key construct in second language acquisition due to its close link with actual language use and communicative competence (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Learners with higher levels of WTC tend to engage more actively in classroom discourse and seek opportunities for authentic interaction, whereas those with lower WTC experience limited communicative practice and reduced language development (Kang, 2005; Shaffer, 2021; Zarei et al., 2019).

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' WTC through their attitudes, behaviour, and pedagogical practices (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Peng, 2014). Research has identified several teacher-related factors, such as empathy, support, and teaching style, that enhance learners' confidence, reduce anxiety, and promote active participation (Amiryousefi, 2018; Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Kaw, 2025; Lee, 2022). Previous research has suggested that teacher involvement may be reflected in supportive behaviours such as warmth, approachability, responsiveness, and enthusiasm, which can encourage some learners to participate more freely (Kálmán, 2021, 2023; Lamb, 2017). In the Iranian EFL context, pedagogical practices such as providing adequate response time and incorporating interactive tasks have been shown to support students' communicative confidence (Amiryousefi, 2018; Zarrinabadi, 2014).

Teachers who demonstrate care, communicate clear expectations, and promote learner autonomy strengthen students' sense of competence and intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing their WTC (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings indicate that teacher-related factors extend beyond instructional techniques; they encompass affective and relational dimensions that are fundamental to learners' communicative readiness.

A positive and supportive classroom climate also plays a vital role in sustaining learners' WTC. Learners are more willing to communicate when they feel confident and motivated, particularly in classrooms characterised by mutual respect, trust, and low anxiety (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021; Khajavy et al., 2018). Studies further highlight that teacher support, group cohesion, and positive peer relations contribute significantly to enhanced WTC (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Kaw, 2025; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng, 2019). In both face-to-face and online environments, teachers who create emotionally responsive and

encouraging atmospheres help students overcome apprehension and engage more confidently in communication (Altunel, 2021; Borasheva, 2024; Hu & Wang, 2023; Kaw, 2025; Yusri & Sulaiman, 2024; Zohrabi & Farshbafan, 2022).

However, these findings need to be interpreted in relation to the specific situations and educational contexts in which WTC occurs. WTC can vary according to group size, topic familiarity, interlocutor type, task characteristics, and interactional arrangement (Cao & Philp, 2006; Kang, 2005). Cao and Philp (2006), for example, found differences in communicative behaviour across whole-class, group, and dyadic interaction, while Khazaei et al. (2012) showed that class size can affect opportunities for oral participation. Similarly, Khajavy et al. (2016) examined classroom environment, including teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation, among English-major university students in an Iranian EFL context. The findings suggest that the classroom should not be treated as a uniform setting and that practices such as pair work, group interaction, teacher support, and response time need to be considered in relation to the conditions under which they are implemented.

The cultural and educational context also warrants attention. Research across Japan, China, Iran, Vietnam, and other EFL contexts indicates that cultural norms, educational traditions, and local classroom conditions can shape WTC (Bensalem et al., 2023; Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Hashimoto, 2002; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng, 2014; Riasati, 2018; Yashima, 2002). Thus, findings from one educational or cultural context should not automatically be generalised to another. This contextual perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, which examines teachers' perceptions within Hungarian higher education. Teachers' perspectives can provide insight into how factors associated with WTC are understood within the specific conditions of their teaching context.

## **Factors Influencing WTC in Online Settings: In-Class Factors**

In digital learning environments, learners' WTC is shaped by both technological features and emotional comfort. Supportive teacher–learner relationships enhance motivation and communicative confidence (Zohrabi & Farshbafan, 2022). Pair work and interactive tools such as text chat and voice chat can create psychologically safe spaces for communication. Text-based interaction often reduces anxiety by removing pronunciation pressure (Kaw, 2025; Satar & Özdener, 2008), while asynchronous communication allows learners extra preparation time, thereby increasing confidence (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017). Similarly, pair work—whether conducted online or face-to-face—has been found to lower anxiety and promote engagement (Cao & Philp, 2006; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015; Vongsila & Reinders, 2016).

Learners' preferences for different communication modes, including camera use, also reflect their emotional comfort and situational needs. Some students feel more relaxed keeping their cameras off, whereas others value visual presence as a means of maintaining focus and connection (Kaw, 2025). This observation aligns with Reinders and Wattana's (2015) findings on the varied effects of digital learning environments. Choices between chat and video communication similarly depend on learners' comfort and task demands (Kaw, 2025). Overall, WTC online depends on how well digital interaction replicates the emotional safety and immediacy of supportive classrooms, with flexibility and personal comfort remaining key to sustained participation (Kruk, 2022).

However, the same contextual caution applies to online environments. Online learning does not constitute a single, uniform communicative setting. Research indicates that topic relevance, interlocutor type, platform design, peer familiarity, emotional connection, and learners' personal preferences can affect WTC in online settings (Altunel, 2021; Kaw, 2025;

Kruk, 2022; Lee, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Altunel (2021), for example, found that limited peer familiarity and reduced emotional connection during pandemic-related online learning were associated with lower WTC. These findings suggest that the effects of online learning need to be considered in relation to the particular interactional and emotional conditions it provides rather than being treated as a uniform alternative to face-to-face learning.

### **Factors Influencing WTC Outside the Classroom**

Many studies have focused on factors that influence WTC in the classroom, but learners also use English and demonstrate WTC in real-life contexts. Research indicates that positive classroom experiences and supportive teacher–student relationships can enhance learners’ confidence to use English outside academic settings (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017). According to Dewaele (2015), much of second language development occurs through informal, naturalistic interaction.

Within the Hungarian higher education context, opportunities to use English in social settings, friendships with international students, travel experiences, personal habits, and professional environments can contribute to shaping university students’ readiness to communicate in English beyond the classroom (Kaw, 2025). Learners who engage in communication in international or work-related situations generally display higher confidence, while those with limited exposure often remain hesitant to initiate interaction. These findings support Cao and Philp’s (2006) view that contextual factors play a key role in fostering WTC by providing opportunities for real-world communication.

Empirical studies have also demonstrated that learners often exhibit greater WTC outside the classroom than during lessons. Başöz and Erten (2018) found that Turkish tertiary-level EFL learners were more willing to communicate in English in out-of-class situations than in classroom interactions. This observation is consistent with earlier research

(e.g., Kostiainen et al., 2018; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Peng, 2014), which similarly reported higher levels of out-of-class WTC among English language learners. Such findings suggest that authentic social environments may promote spontaneous language use by reducing performance pressure and enhancing enjoyment. Despite these insights, the out-of-class dimension of WTC has received considerably less attention in research compared with classroom-based communication. Although communicative competence remains a fundamental goal of language education, possessing the necessary linguistic knowledge and communicative skills does not necessarily ensure that learners are willing to communicate. Consequently, increasing attention has been devoted to the motivational, emotional, and contextual factors that influence learners' willingness to communicate (Khajavy et al., 2016; MacIntyre et al., 1998).

A substantial body of research has examined WTC across both Western and non-Western educational contexts (Bensalem et al., 2023, 2024; Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022; Clément et al., 2003; Hashimoto, 2002; Kasza-Tóth, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2001, 2003; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Peng, 2014; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002). However, research in the Hungarian tertiary education context remains limited, particularly in the postpandemic period. Moreover, although teachers are widely recognised as playing a crucial role in fostering learners' WTC (Chen et al., 2021; Hu & Wang, 2023), previous research has focused predominantly on students' perspectives, leaving teachers' perceptions comparatively underexplored. This is important because teachers are not only participants in the classroom environment but also those who organise classroom interaction and implement pedagogical practices within particular teaching contexts. Examining teachers' perspectives can therefore complement existing student-centred research and provide insight into how factors associated with WTC are perceived within a specific educational context.

Against this background, the present study investigates EFL university teachers' perceptions on what influences their students' WTC in English within Hungarian higher education. By examining teachers' experiences across both face-to-face and online learning environments, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how pedagogical practices, classroom dynamics, and teacher characteristics influence students' communicative engagement.

## **Research Methods**

Based on the literature review and aligned with the aim of this study, the following research question was developed:

What are EFL university teachers' perceptions about what motivates students to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom in the context of Hungarian higher education?

### **Qualitative Design**

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate EFL university teachers' perceptions of what motivates students to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom in Hungarian higher education. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to gain a deep understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences in their natural context (Dörnyei, 2007). One-on-one interviews were selected as the most effective method for collecting data as they provide opportunities for an in-depth examination of individuals' subjective experiences, opinions, and emotions. This approach aligns with Dörnyei's (2007) emphasis on the value of qualitative inquiry in capturing the complexity of language learning and teaching processes. To obtain rich and detailed insights, semistructured interviews were conducted with 11 EFL university teachers.

## Participants and Setting

The study was conducted with EFL university teachers in Hungary during 2025. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, which, according to Dörnyei (2007), typically results in the recruitment of willing participants who are essential for obtaining rich qualitative data. In terms of educational background, eight participants held PhD degrees, and three were PhD candidates. The group consisted of six female and five male teachers. The participants were of different nationalities, including a German and a Greek American as well as Hungarians, who comprised the remaining majority. Some participants teach only language practice courses, whereas others teach both language practice and content courses. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants. The participants' background information is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

### *The Participants*

| Pseudonyms | Age | Gender | Job title           | Educational background | Years of teaching English in general | Years of teaching English at the university |
|------------|-----|--------|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Gabi       | 27  | F      | Assistant Lecturer  | PhD candidate          | Approx. 3 years                      | Approx. 3 years                             |
| Jason      | 31  | M      | Lecturer            | PhD candidate          | Approx. 8 years                      | Approx. 8 years                             |
| Ulrich     | 64  | M      | Associate Professor | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 40 years                     | Approx. 40 years                            |
| Nóra       | 27  | F      | Assistant Lecturer  | PhD candidate          | Approx. 4 years                      | Approx. 3 years                             |
| Mária      | 65  | F      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 40 years                     | Approx. 40 years                            |
| András     | 44  | M      | Associate Professor | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 20 years                     | Approx. 5 years                             |
| Csongor    | 51  | M      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 32 years                     | Approx. 12 years                            |
| Anikó      | 30  | F      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 6 years                      | Approx. 6 years                             |
| Rebeka     | 34  | F      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 15 years                     | Approx. 10 years                            |
| Mónika     | 39  | F      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 18 years                     | Approx. 6 years                             |
| Ákos       | 36  | M      | Senior Lecturer     | PhD degree holder      | Approx. 13 years                     | Approx. 8 years                             |

## **The Instrument**

A semistructured interview guide was designed based on the research question, existing literature, and expert feedback. This format was chosen because it allows flexibility in questioning while encouraging participants to express their thoughts freely without being limited by predefined response categories. Following Dörnyei's (2007) recommendations, the interview guide consisted of four main parts: an introduction, background questions, core questions, and a closing question. The background section gathered information about participants' age, job title, educational background, and years of teaching experience. The core section focused on teachers' perceptions of what motivates students to communicate in English both inside and outside the classroom within the Hungarian tertiary context.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The interview guide was designed with reference to the research question and the relevant literature. Its development involved a systematic validation process, during which the guide was reviewed, piloted, and refined before being used in the main study. Initially, experts examined the interview questions and provided feedback on their clarity, relevance, and organisation. Their suggestions informed revisions to the wording and sequence of several questions. Subsequently, two pilot interviews were carried out to assess whether the questions were clear, comprehensible, and capable of generating rich and relevant data. Insights gained from these pilot interviews led to additional refinements, including rephrasing questions, rearranging their order, introducing new questions, and removing items that were considered redundant. Minor adjustments continued throughout the data collection process until data saturation was achieved. The final interview guide (Appendix) was considered well suited to eliciting comprehensive responses that addressed the aims of the study, and no further revisions were deemed necessary.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Invitation emails outlining the purpose of the study and the ethical considerations were sent to EFL university teachers, and interviews were conducted with those who volunteered to participate. Before each interview, participants provided informed consent and were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Data collection took place in 2025 across eleven individual interviews. Eight interviews were conducted in person, while three were held online via Microsoft Teams, depending on participants' preferences. Participants consented to the recording of interviews and were reminded that they could request the recording to stop at any time. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 35 minutes. The participant group included nine native speakers of Hungarian, one native speaker of German, and one native speaker of English. Due to the researcher's lack of knowledge of the non-English languages above, English was the language used for communication and conducting the interviews. Each recorded interview was carefully reviewed, and the content was examined with attention to two key qualitative features outlined by Dörnyei (2007): the natural flow of conversation and the richness of detail in the participants' accounts. The quotations presented in the findings are verbatim excerpts from the interview transcripts.

After transcription, the interviews were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Initial codes were generated manually by the author through repeated reading of the transcripts. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and refined into overarching themes. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a second researcher independently reviewed a sample of the coded transcripts. Differences in coding were discussed until consensus was reached, resulting in the refinement of several categories and themes. The overall analytical process was guided by Creswell's (2014) framework for qualitative data analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' WTC Inside the Classroom**

The interviews with 11 EFL university teachers revealed a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing students' WTC in English within the classroom. Teachers consistently described WTC as a dynamic, context-dependent construct rather than a stable learner trait. They viewed it as continuously shaped by the interplay of teacher behaviour, learner characteristics, and classroom conditions. A recurring theme across all interviews was the pivotal role of the teacher in creating and sustaining students' communicative engagement. Participants perceived themselves as the main architects in establishing the classroom's communicative climate, which suggests that their attitudes, interactional styles, and pedagogical choices directly affect learners' readiness to speak. Participants also recognised that learners' psychological, cultural, and situational realities interact with pedagogical efforts.

Three major thematic categories emerged from the analysis: (1) teacher-related influences, (2) learner-related characteristics, and (3) contextual factors. Consistent with previous research, the teachers in this study viewed WTC as a fluctuating phenomenon shaped largely by the affective and interpersonal atmosphere of the classroom (Kang, 2005; Peng, 2014). Their reflections further reinforce the notion that the teacher's role is central in fostering supportive communicative environments and sustaining learners' WTC (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Zarrinabadi, 2014).

#### ***Teacher-Related Influences***

All participants highlighted the teacher's influence as the decisive factor in shaping students' WTC. Teachers' methodology, presence, personality, and emotional expression were repeatedly mentioned as central. As Gabi reflected, "students often read the teacher's

energy before they speak—if I seem patient and genuinely interested, they dare to try.”

Similarly, Ulrich observed that “learners speak more when they feel listened to, not examined.” Participants described how an approachable, authentic demeanour and nonjudgmental feedback create an atmosphere of trust where communication can flourish.

Some participants underlined that emotional resonance and positivity are contagious in the classroom. Mária observed that “a joyful teacher produces joyful talk,” while Nóra found that “small human moments—humour, empathy, openness—break the silence faster than any grammar prompt.” Students’ own language-learning histories also played a role. Gabi and Mónika both noted that learners who had encouraging teachers or authentic experiences abroad, for example, through Erasmus mobility programmes, “carry that confidence into every English class” (Gabi), whereas those who had been ridiculed or silenced “often bring invisible hesitation” (Mónika).

Many participants viewed the classroom atmosphere as ultimately sustained by the teacher’s emotional presence. András expressed this succinctly: “Atmosphere is policy in action—the way we respond to mistakes decides who will speak next.” Similarly, Csongor remarked that “when laughter and curiosity fill the room, speaking becomes natural, not forced.” These reflections suggest that WTC begins with the teacher’s emotional and pedagogical choices. As Ákos acknowledged, the teacher’s response to errors can “either freeze or free” students’ WTC. Overall, every participant positioned the teacher as the core catalyst of communicative engagement.

Throughout all interviews, the teacher consistently appeared as the strongest influence on students’ WTC. This finding supports earlier studies that highlight how teacher immediacy, involvement, and empathy nurture learners’ communicative engagement (Amiryousefi, 2018; Bui et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Lee,

2022). Teachers in the present study described how approachability, humour, and nonjudgmental feedback built trust and emotional safety. Comments such as “a joyful teacher produces joyful talk” (Mária) exemplify the emotional contagion discussed in prior work on teacher enthusiasm and classroom climate (Amiryousefi, 2018; Lee, 2022). Likewise, participants’ emphasis on emotional resonance and positive energy resonates with Kálmán’s (2021, 2023) and Lamb’s (2017) findings that teacher enthusiasm and interpersonal warmth significantly enhance classroom communication. When teachers demonstrate care, patience, and openness, they help fulfil students’ needs for relatedness and competence, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and WTC (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

### ***Learner-Related Characteristics***

While teachers viewed themselves as central agents in fostering communication, they also recognised that students bring diverse psychological and experiential factors to the classroom. The most frequently mentioned factor was personality, identified by nine participants. Extroverted and confident learners were described as naturally more vocal, whereas introverted students, though often highly capable, tended to be seen as hesitant. As Jason observed, “some of my best thinkers rarely speak—it’s not their English, it’s their self-comfort.” Eight participants mentioned issues of language proficiency and anxiety. They reported that learners with limited vocabulary or grammar knowledge were perceived as more reluctant to take risks. Ákos remarked that “students who fear mistakes prefer silence to embarrassment.”

Many teachers emphasised that confidence and pronunciation play intertwined roles in WTC. Nóra observed that “students often begin with an apology for their accent,” while Mária noted that “pronunciation is identity—if they feel ‘wrong,’ they withdraw.” Mónika added that “small successes build courage,” illustrating how confidence can be gradually

nurtured through positive reinforcement. Three participants highlighted motivation as a powerful psychological driver. As András explained, “when students want to speak for themselves, not for grades, communication becomes genuine.” Participants also identified the influence of students’ cultural and educational backgrounds. Six teachers felt that learners from hierarchical or exam-oriented educational systems tended to be less comfortable expressing opinions. As Ulrich mentioned, “if in their families their voices didn’t count, they bring that silence here.”

Other factors such as age, year of study, language attitude, and educational background were also mentioned as relevant. Jason noted that students in the later years of their university studies, particularly those who had already completed their first year, “speak more willingly because they have accepted imperfection as part of learning,” whereas Nóra observed that first-year students “often need structured encouragement.” Mónika and Rebeka noted that students who are used to open discussions find it easier to take risks when speaking. Perfectionism emerged as another recurring barrier; as Nóra explained, “they want to speak perfectly, so they end up not speaking at all.” These insights suggest that learner-related variables are not fixed traits but dynamic tendencies that evolve through teacher influence and classroom experience.

Overall, the teachers acknowledged that individual learner factors such as personality, proficiency, confidence, and anxiety mediate students’ communicative behaviour. These insights align with previous findings that self-confidence and motivation are key predictors of WTC (Khajavy et al., 2018; Peng, 2019). Participants’ observations that introverted or perfectionist learners may hesitate despite adequate proficiency echo evidence that anxiety and self-perception constrain students’ WTC (Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). The recurring connection between pronunciation and identity also supports Dewaele and Dewaele’s (2018) argument that affective comfort and positive self-image are essential for active participation.

Furthermore, teachers' awareness of cultural and educational backgrounds aligns with studies that emphasise the contextualised nature of communicative behaviour (Kang, 2005; Peng, 2019). Finally, teachers' emphasis on gradually building confidence through small successes reinforces the view that WTC is developmental and responsive to teacher mediation (Amiryousefi, 2018; MacIntyre et al., 2001).

### ***Contextual Factors***

Beyond teacher and learner dimensions, the participants discussed how contextual factors can influence learners' WTC at different stages during classroom interaction. Many agreed that communicative behaviour depends on course type, topic, and task design. Gabi observed that "in translation classes, Hungarian is a necessary tool, but in skills courses, we build an English-only environment." Many participants noted that when topics were personally meaningful or creative, students spoke more readily. As Rebeka remarked, "when they care about the topic, the silence disappears."

Group dynamics and positive peer relationships also emerged as key situational themes, mentioned by six participants. Gabi observed that "if the students are very close to each other and know each other well, they get into very heated classroom discussions, and they tend to enjoy that a lot." Teachers agreed that when students know and trust one another, they are more willing to participate in classroom discussions. The general classroom atmosphere, described by five teachers, was viewed as both a product and a condition of communication. As Mária summarised, "a calm, encouraging atmosphere opens mouths; tension closes them." A relaxed and accepting atmosphere was seen as essential for fostering students' WTC.

Environmental factors such as time of day, weather, and even room temperature were also mentioned as subtle yet real influences. Jason remarked humorously, "eight in the

morning or five in the evening on a winter day is not the best time for spontaneous English.” In addition, five teachers referred to students’ emotional and personal states as situational determinants. Anikó explained that “when students are weighed down by personal worries, their mental space for communication shrinks.” These reflections highlight that WTC is fluid and context-dependent, varying not only across learners and teachers but also across time, topics, and emotional circumstances.

Participants’ views reinforce the understanding that WTC fluctuates depending on task design, topic relevance, and group dynamics. This finding corresponds with earlier research showing that interactive and personally meaningful tasks enhance engagement and communicative confidence (Peng, 2007; Zarrinabadi, 2014). Teachers’ remarks that emotionally safe and cohesive groups encourage participation align with previous evidence that group cohesion and positive peer relationships are important facilitators of classroom communication (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2018; Khajavy et al., 2016; Peng, 2019). Moreover, participants’ awareness of institutional and environmental factors—such as class size, assessment methods, and time of day—supports Hu and Wang’s (2023) conclusion that WTC is not purely psychological but also situationally dynamic, responding to immediate contextual cues. Finally, teachers’ observations that emotional strain or daily stress can reduce students’ communicative readiness echo findings linking affective states and anxiety to moment-to-moment variations in WTC (Borasheva, 2024; Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). Table 2 summarises the major teacher-related, learner-related, and contextual factors identified through the thematic analysis.

**Table 2**

*EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Communicate Inside the Classroom*

| Themes                          | Factors                                                                       |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teacher-related influences      | Teaching methodology                                                          |
|                                 | Teacher presence                                                              |
|                                 | Teacher's personality                                                         |
|                                 | Teacher's emotional expression                                                |
|                                 | Classroom atmosphere                                                          |
| Learner-related characteristics | Personality                                                                   |
|                                 | Confidence                                                                    |
|                                 | Language proficiency                                                          |
|                                 | Motivation                                                                    |
|                                 | Influence of students' cultural and educational backgrounds                   |
|                                 | Age                                                                           |
|                                 | Year of study                                                                 |
|                                 | Language attitude                                                             |
|                                 | Educational background                                                        |
|                                 | Pronunciation                                                                 |
|                                 | Language anxiety                                                              |
| Contextual conditions           | Course type                                                                   |
|                                 | Topic relevance                                                               |
|                                 | Task design                                                                   |
|                                 | Group dynamics                                                                |
|                                 | Interpersonal safety                                                          |
|                                 | Environmental factors such as time of day, weather, and even room temperature |

**EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' WTC in an Online Setting**

The findings indicate that students' WTC in online settings is influenced by both technological design and the teacher's role in creating an interactive and supportive learning atmosphere. While most participants found face-to-face classrooms more engaging and emotionally dynamic, they acknowledged that well-organised online lessons could also achieve communicative outcomes. The analysis identified three overarching themes: engagement in online versus in-person classes, the impact of camera use on communication,

and the role of digital tools in shaping online interaction during online teaching. Although the teachers' views varied depending on their experience, they consistently emphasised that effective organisation and strong teacher presence were the key factors sustaining learners' WTC in virtual environments.

### ***Engagement in Online Versus In-Person Communication***

All participants except Ulrich and Mónika believed that students tend to be more communicative in face-to-face settings. They described learners as more lively, spontaneous, and emotionally present when physically in the same room. As Mária observed, “in person, you can sense energy—students laugh, respond to each other, and build on ideas. That rhythm is often lost online.” Similarly, Jason commented that “face-to-face classes bring out the natural flow of conversation; online interaction can feel delayed or restrained.” Participants attributed this difference to the lack of immediate social feedback in virtual environments. Anikó explained that “students are more cautious online as they don't see others' facial reactions clearly,” while Csongor added that “the classroom atmosphere is harder to recreate through a screen.”

However, not all teachers viewed online learning negatively. Ulrich described the virtual environment as “safer” for some students, particularly those who are shy or anxious in physical classrooms: “A few students found their voice online—they could type first or speak in smaller breakout rooms without fear of judgement.” Some participants suggested that communication quality depends less on the mode of delivery and more on the teacher's organisation. As Mónika argued, “the way I structure the lesson matters most. I design it so students can't hide in silence. With the right tasks, a teacher can make them talk—online or offline.”

Teachers emphasised that while face-to-face classrooms remain more naturally engaging, well-structured online lessons can also sustain meaningful interaction. This finding supports Zohrabi and Farshbafan's (2022) claim that friendly, supportive teacher–learner relationships play a decisive role in fostering motivation and communicative confidence in digital environments.

### ***The Impact of Camera Use on Communication***

Camera use emerged as a recurring and divisive topic among teachers. Six participants preferred students to keep their cameras on, arguing that visual contact fosters accountability, connection, and immediacy. Jason explained, “I always ask students to keep their cameras on; otherwise, it feels like speaking into the void.” Similarly, Nóra remarked, “it’s not about control; it’s about creating a sense of community. Seeing each other’s faces makes interaction human again.” Mária noted that cameras help her “read students’ reactions,” while Csongor observed that “students seem more focused when they know they are visible.”

However, other teachers, including Ulrich, András, and Mónika, believed that camera use does not automatically determine participation. Ulrich reflected that “some students talk more freely when they are off camera; it gives them a sense of privacy and reduces anxiety.” Mónika also added, “whether cameras are on or off, what matters is how the task is structured and how the teacher maintains interaction.” These differing perspectives suggest that while visibility can enhance connection and immediacy, it may also increase self-consciousness for some learners.

For some participants, flexibility works best. Allowing students to decide when to use their cameras encourages both comfort and responsibility. Teachers who supported flexible camera policies, for example, Csongor, acknowledged that visibility strengthens social

connection but can also heighten anxiety—an observation consistent with research indicating that psychological safety in online environments significantly affects learner participation (Buckingham & Alpaslan, 2017).

### ***The Role of Digital Tools in Shaping Online Interaction***

Teachers discussed how various communication tools, particularly video-based speaking and text-based chat, shape interaction in online settings. Participants agreed that these tools serve complementary purposes. Seven teachers emphasised that the choice of medium should match the task objective. For short responses or collective brainstorming, the chat function was considered highly effective. Jason described it as “a quick, democratic way to collect every student’s input,” while Ulrich valued it for “giving equal voice to shy students who might not speak up aloud.” When tasks required longer and more spontaneous communication, teachers preferred video discussions or breakout rooms. As Mónica explained, “if I want them to elaborate or react to each other, I send them into breakout rooms—those conversations can be just as rich as in-person.” Teachers also observed that students’ personality and preparedness often influence their preferred communication mode. Reflecting on their classroom experiences, Csongor noted that “confident students prefer speaking, while cautious ones start with typing,” and Anikó added that students become more active during synchronous online classes once they feel psychologically safe.

Teachers’ reflections on communication modes echo earlier research on affective safety in digital contexts. Participants noted that written communication through the online chat function allowed shy or anxious students to contribute more freely, supporting Kaw's (2025) and Satar and Özdener's (2008) findings that written communication reduces pronunciation pressure and anxiety. Kaw (2025) also observed that learners’ preference for communicating through the online chat function or speaking during synchronous online

classes varies according to their comfort level and the nature of the task. Participants further emphasised that technology alone does not determine students' WTC; its effectiveness depends on how teachers design, scaffold, and humanise the learning experience (see Figure 1). Collectively, these insights reinforce the view that WTC in online environments is influenced by the extent to which digital interaction recreates the emotional safety, immediacy, and social connectedness characteristic of supportive physical classrooms (Zohrabi & Farshbafan, 2022).

**Figure 1**

*Mind Map Illustrating EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Communicate in an Online Learning Setting*



### **EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' WTC Outside the Classroom**

The interviews with EFL university teachers revealed interrelated factors that influence students' WTC in English beyond the classroom. Ten key influences were identified: friend group and environment, work, hobbies, proficiency, pronunciation anxiety, travel, limited opportunities for use, awareness of importance, courage and personal engagement, and situations requiring English. These can be grouped into two main themes: the social and environmental context and individual and psychological factors.

#### ***The Social and Environmental Context***

Teachers perceived that students' WTC outside the classroom was strongly influenced by their social surroundings and the availability of authentic opportunities to use English.

Based on their interactions with students and classroom discussions, teachers believed that learners who socialised with international friends or Erasmus students were more likely to use English in everyday situations, whereas those whose social networks consisted mainly of Hungarian peers had fewer opportunities to communicate in English. As Jason explained, English often remained “academic rather than lived” when students lacked real-life exposure.

Workplaces were described as important settings where students have regular opportunities to use English. Students employed in multinational companies or hospitality sectors use English regularly, which enhances both fluency and confidence. Teachers observed that for many young adults, the workplace becomes their real English classroom. As Csongor mentioned, “if they have a job alongside university where they have to use English, they will obviously use it a lot.” Similarly, travel, studying abroad, and online gaming were also mentioned as valuable means of using English outside the classroom.

### ***Individual and Psychological Factors***

Beyond social context, teachers highlighted the crucial role of individual traits in shaping students’ WTC in English outside the classroom. Language proficiency was seen as a necessary foundation for spontaneous communication, yet pronunciation anxiety often undermined it. Teachers observed that some learners tend to avoid speaking English because they worry that their pronunciation or accent may be judged negatively, even though many of their out-of-class interactions are likely to involve speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This perceived fear of negative evaluation may discourage learners from communicating in English even when their linguistic competence is sufficient.

Teachers also identified courage, confidence, and self-engagement as key psychological factors influencing WTC. Teachers noted that students often recognise their communicative potential only when placed in situations where Hungarian is not an option.

Recognising English as a living skill rather than a school subject was also considered essential. Csongor noted that when learners understand that English “opens doors—not just exam results,” they are more willing and confident to use it beyond academic settings.

Teachers also mentioned that students’ exposure to English outside the classroom largely depends on their personal engagement with the language. Many learners stay connected to English through watching films on Netflix, reading books in English, and using various forms of digital media. Although these activities are mainly receptive, they were viewed as valuable sources of linguistic input that familiarise students with English as it is used in a range of real-life communicative contexts. However, teachers questioned how far such engagement extends to productive skills, particularly speaking. As Ulrich remarked:

“when it comes to productive use, especially speaking, in Budapest there are some opportunities—like conversation clubs or English-language cultural events—but I am not confident that Hungarian students actively seek them out. Some might, but I doubt it is widespread.”

The teachers’ reflections indicate that students’ WTC beyond the classroom depends strongly on both their social context and personal readiness to use English. This finding supports those of Kaw’s (2025) study, in which it was shown that students use English in various real-life contexts—such as workplaces, travel, and social interactions—demonstrating its value as a versatile and essential communication tool. It also aligns with Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak’s (2007) argument that positive classroom experiences and teacher–student relationships can extend to out-of-class communication when authentic opportunities exist. Furthermore, it corresponds with Dewaele’s (2015) finding that informal, natural interactions play an important role in developing communicative confidence. Table 3

summarises the EFL teachers' perceptions of the key social, psychological, and environmental factors that influence students' WTC outside the classroom.

**Table 3**

*EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Communicate Outside the Classroom*

| Themes                               | Factors                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The social and environmental context | Social surroundings such as friend group and environment                                                                         |
|                                      | Workplaces                                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Travel                                                                                                                           |
|                                      | Studying abroad                                                                                                                  |
| Individual and psychological factors | Language proficiency                                                                                                             |
|                                      | Pronunciation anxiety                                                                                                            |
|                                      | Courage                                                                                                                          |
|                                      | Confidence                                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Personal engagement or hobby such as online games                                                                                |
|                                      | Awareness of importance of the language                                                                                          |
|                                      | Students' exposure to English such as watching films on Netflix, reading English books, and using various forms of digital media |

## Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

This study explored EFL university teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing students' WTC in English across face-to-face classroom, online learning, and out-of-class contexts in Hungarian higher education. The findings contribute to understanding WTC beyond formal classroom interaction by highlighting teachers' perceptions of the factors that may influence students' willingness to communicate outside the classroom. They also provide insight into teachers' experiences of students' communication in face-to-face and online learning environments and the practices they use to encourage communication across these contexts.

The findings revealed that in classroom settings, WTC is a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by the interaction of teacher, learner, and situational factors. Beyond the classroom, students' readiness to use English was closely linked to learners' individual differences and social environments that encouraged communication. Teachers also emphasised that effective online engagement depends on replicating the immediacy and warmth of supportive classrooms through thoughtful task design and emotional connection.

The findings highlight the decisive role teachers play in shaping students' WTC across both physical and virtual settings. Beyond the classroom, teachers also described encouraging students to engage with English through everyday activities such as watching English-language media, interacting with international speakers, travelling, and seeking opportunities to use English in real-life situations. These practices were viewed as extending opportunities for language use beyond formal classroom instruction. To enhance students' WTC, teachers should focus on building rapport and fostering positive, engaging classroom environments where learners feel safe and valued. Demonstrating empathy, maintaining emotional warmth, and responding supportively to mistakes can reduce anxiety and promote active participation. Establishing clear goals and providing constructive feedback helps align learners' efforts with their long-term language aspirations. At the institutional level, language programmes should offer professional development that helps teachers balance structure with spontaneity and cultivate immediacy in both face-to-face and digital contexts. Training in digital relational pedagogy can further support teacher presence and sustain learner engagement online.

However, these implications should be understood in relation to the specific context of the study. The findings arise from teachers working in Hungarian higher education and should not be assumed to apply in the same way across different educational settings. As the literature review has shown, WTC is sensitive to situational and contextual conditions,

including interactional arrangements, interlocutors, tasks, and the broader educational environment. The practical relevance of particular approaches to fostering WTC may therefore depend on the conditions in which teachers and learners interact.

Although this study was conducted within the Hungarian higher education context, its implications extend to similar EFL university settings globally. The findings could offer valuable insights for language pedagogy, particularly in promoting learners' WTC through supportive and interactive learning environments. Moreover, the research may contribute to language pedagogy by enriching the understanding of EFL learners' WTC across classroom, digital, and real-world contexts. The results may have practical relevance for educators and learners alike, informing more effective communicative teaching approaches and addressing existing gaps in language education.

As with any qualitative study, the findings should be interpreted in the light of certain limitations. Firstly, the study was based on a relatively small sample of 11 EFL university teachers from two Hungarian universities. Although the participants provided rich insights drawn from their professional experience, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than statistically representative of all EFL teachers in Hungarian higher education. Secondly, the study explored teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing students' WTC and did not include students' own perspectives. Although teachers provided valuable insights based on their professional experience, their perceptions may not fully reflect students' own experiences, especially in out-of-class contexts. Thirdly, the study examined WTC across face-to-face, online, and out-of-class contexts through teachers' accounts, but it did not directly observe students' communicative behaviour across these contexts. The findings therefore reflect teachers' perceptions of students' WTC rather than direct measures of students' willingness or actual communication. Finally, the qualitative design was intended to provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions rather than

to produce findings that can be generalised to other settings. Therefore, caution should be exercised when interpreting and transferring the findings beyond the context of this study.

Future research could address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples of teachers from a wider range of higher education institutions. In addition, studies conducted in different educational and cultural contexts would help determine the extent to which the present findings are transferable beyond Hungarian higher education. Comparative research across educational settings could also examine whether factors identified in the present study operate similarly under different institutional and interactional conditions. Such research would help clarify the extent to which findings from one educational context can be applied to another.

Future research could also examine how EFL university teachers foster their students' willingness to communicate in English. It could complement the interview data with questionnaire-based evidence to strengthen the robustness and generalisability of the findings. Adopting longitudinal or mixed-methods designs would allow researchers to trace how WTC evolves over time and to triangulate results across different sources (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei, 2007). Comparing institutional contexts and including larger and more diverse samples could further validate the emerging themes. Additionally, future research could examine university EFL students' reported WTC alongside EFL teachers' perceptions of students' WTC and compare the two perspectives. Such research could provide deeper insights into students' experiences and teachers' perceptions and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape students' willingness to communicate.

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## **Appendix**

### **The Final Version of the Interview Guide for EFL University Teachers**

Dear .....,

Thank you for volunteering to take part in the interview and helping me with this research. The aim of this research is to explore EFL teachers' perceptions about what motivates students to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom in the context of Hungarian tertiary education. This interview will be used for research purposes only, and the analysis will be based on a summary of the collected data. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and full anonymity is guaranteed; no personal details will be disclosed. I am interested in hearing about your personal experiences and opinions, and there are no right or wrong answers. Your unique insights and perspectives are extremely valuable for this study. The interview is expected to take approximately 30-50 minutes, and with your permission, I would like to record our conversation. If, at any point during the interview, you feel uncomfortable, please let me know, and we can temporarily or permanently stop the recording. We can begin whenever you are ready.

#### **Introductory questions:**

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself, including your teaching experience and the levels of students you teach?
2. Could you please tell me about your position at this university?
3. How long have you been teaching English?
4. What is your educational background?
5. What is your nationality?
6. How old are you?

#### **EFL Teachers' Perceptions about What Motivates Students to Communicate in English Inside and Outside the Classroom in the Context of Hungarian Higher Education**

1. In your opinion, what influences how much your students use English inside the classroom?
2. Based on your experience, what influences your students' willingness to communicate in English during class?

- 2.1 Do aspects like age, gender, program, classroom activities, discussion topics, classroom environment, or personality traits play a role?
- 2.2 Do they enjoy participating, or do they find it challenging? Do they speak up voluntarily, or do they need encouragement?
3. In your experience, which interaction style do students seem most comfortable with: pair work, small groups, or whole-class discussions with the teacher? Why might that be?
  4. Have you observed any cultural or individual factors that influence students' willingness to communicate in English?
  5. In your experience, are students more willing to communicate in English during in-person classes or online classes? Why do you think that is?
  6. In your experience, do students participate more actively in English when they turn their videos on or off during online classes? What factors might influence this?
  7. In your experience, which format encourages students to communicate more in online lessons: video chat or text chat (chat box)? What explains this preference?
  8. In your opinion, what or who makes your students reluctant to speak English in the classroom?
  9. How do you balance error correction with maintaining students' confidence in speaking?
  10. How do you address students' fear of making mistakes when speaking English?
  11. In your opinion, what influences how much your students use English outside the classroom?